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THE MORAL PARADOX OF JESUS

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Mr. Chesterton is not a reliable theologian, but he does have a wonderful faculty of forcing his readers to look at things from a new point of view. In his exasperating but stimulating book *Orthodoxy* is a passage which shows real insight into Jesus' teaching and compels attention to a much-neglected aspect of it. Mr. Chesterton says:

Christ had a literary style of his own, not to be found, I think, elsewhere. It consists of an almost furious use of the *a fortiori*. His "how much more" is piled upon another like castle upon castle in the clouds. The diction used about Christ has been, and perhaps wisely, sweet and submissive; but the diction used by Christ is quite curiously gigantesque; it is full of camels leaping through needles, and mountains hurled into the sea. Morally it is equally terrific; he called himself a sword of slaughter, told men to buy swords if they sold their coats for them. That he used other even wilder words on the side of non-resistance greatly increases the mystery, but it also if anything rather increases the violence. Here we must remember the definition of Christianity already given. Christianity is a superhuman paradox whereby two opposite passions may blaze beside each other.

Mr. Chesterton's paradoxes are oftentimes only the idle fancies of a fertile brain, but this one can be dismissed in no such ready fashion; it strikes deep into the reality of things. Through the very texture of the teaching of Jesus runs this paradoxical element. The gospels bristle with contradictions. Any careful reader who looks there for moral guidance finds himself confronted with two radically different attitudes toward life. Side by side with a renunciation of the world as stern as that of an Indian yogi is a childlike joy in life as simple as that of which Wordsworth sang.

On the one hand, Jesus taught his disciples that they were not to lay up for themselves treasures on earth, but in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt and where thieves do not break through and steal. "Ye cannot serve God and Mammon,"

he declared unto them. He bade the rich young ruler to give away his wealth in alms and follow him. It is easier, we read, for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of Heaven; the only hope for him is in the mercy of God. Jesus' disciples were taught that for food and drink and clothing they must simply trust the Lord. They were to love their enemies and turn the other cheek to him who smote the one. They were to invite to their homes only those who could not return the hospitality. Jesus warned everyone who would follow him that he must count the cost. No turning back was allowed even to bury one's parent. Nay more, if the demand comes, he must be ready to hate his own father and mother.

There is a violent radicalism in such words as these which the most ingenious exegesis cannot soften down. Converting the needles' eyes of Jesus into city gates may show learning but it does not show appreciation of the Master's spirit. The fair-minded reader must acknowledge that Tolstoi interprets such passages as these more truly than the many who weaken them into inane moral platitudes. The trouble with Tolstoian exegesis is not so much in its wrong interpretation of certain sayings as in its failure to recognize both sides in the ethical paradox of the gospels. There is another aspect just as strongly emphasized as the one which we have been considering.

Unlike Paul, who had no eye for the beauties of nature, the Savior himself had a poet's delight in the natural world. The birds of the heaven, the lilies of the field, the ripening grain, the feeding sheep, all were good. He rejoiced in them as in the goodness of God. The apparent indifference of Nature, who sends her rain on the just and unjust alike, was to him only a manifestation of God's loving forbearance. He who taught "if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out," toiled to the point of exhaustion in caring for men's physical needs; he placed the wants of the body above the observance of the fourth commandment. The same Jesus who bade men lay up treasure in heaven, not on earth, was condemned as a wine-bibber and a glutton. One of the gospels opens the Savior's ministry amid the festivities of an oriental wedding celebration. Over against the command to the rich

young ruler to sell his possessions and give alms, is to be put his commendation of Mary in her extravagant use of precious ointment that might have been sold for the poor. Jesus evidently rejoiced in that Bethany home which did not lack its luxuries. If he told his disciples that they must be willing to hate father and mother, he guarded the sanctity of the home in absolute terms and he affectionately put his arms around the little children. This is God's world, not the devil's; the things of this world are good, its pleasures are good, they are all gifts of the heavenly Father and are to be received in joy and gratitude.

What relation shall this joy and gladness in life have to the stern renunciation of the world which is equally manifest in Jesus' life and teaching? Here has always been the great problem of Christian ethics. To meet it, the Roman church at an early date developed the theory of a double standard of morality; one standard for the great mass of people who do their duty as citizens in the world, but who can expect at the most only a bare entrance into heaven; and another for the few set aside to be priests. They must take the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, and by so doing they lay up for themselves especial treasure in heaven. Great stress is laid by the Roman church on the words to the rich ruler as Matthew gives them: "If thou wouldst be *perfect*, go and sell what thou hast and give to the poor." When the teachings of Jesus are taken in all earnestness, we must recognize how naturally this Roman double standard follows. In a modified form it has even been accepted by some protestant scholars. But ethics must have an absolute ideal if it is to retain its imperative quality. And it is hardly open to question today whether such a complete separation of the priest has not lowered instead of elevating him.

More modern is the attempt to appeal to the historical limitations of the world of Jesus. In agricultural Galilee, where people lived simply on the produce of soil and water, his position is explicable, we are told. Only when one seeks to apply his teaching to the complex social conditions of today does a paradox arise. It must be granted that the modern world is radically different from the ancient. Precepts cannot always be simply transferred from

one age to the other. Selling one's goods and giving to the poor is not now the best expression of a man's love to his neighbor. Many sayings of Jesus must be interpreted in the light of the particular circumstances which called them forth. Nevertheless, no study of local conditions in Palestine can remove the paradox which confronts us in the gospels. The difficulty is not anything arising out of temporary circumstances. The Sermon on the Mount seemed just as impracticable to those who first heard it as it does today. On the other hand, those apparently impossible demands of Jesus appeal to our age just as strongly as they did to his. Men have ever hesitated to accept them unreservedly, but they have never dared reject them. As Dr. Feine has put it, "they sink into our hearts as a thorn which we cannot tear out." They goad us on toward an ideal whose power over the human soul abides amid all vicissitudes of time. The gigantesque style of Jesus, so full of hyperboles and paradoxes, is a most inappropriate vehicle for setting forth laws and precepts, but how wonderfully effective in inspiring religious ideals! The difficulty, though, is not merely a literary or pedagogical one, for there are two contradictory ideals which the gospels seem to present.

Other scholars solve the problem by distinguishing sharply two different periods in Jesus' ministry. The note of joy and gladness, they say, dominated the earlier days while he went about among the villages of Galilee; the call to sacrifice and renunciation gained frequency as the shadow of the cross more and more darkened the horizon. Every reader of the Gospel of Mark must feel the change of atmosphere that begins with the confession of Peter in the eighth chapter. The bright skies are no more; the heavens, thenceforth, are black with storm clouds. But the gospels do not justify us in classifying all Jesus' sayings according to this change in the reception of his message. It is not a case of a dark cloth sewed on a bright one; strands of brightness and strands of darkness run through the whole fabric of his teaching. The shifting of outward circumstance was a result of Jesus' paradoxical attitude toward life, and only incidentally a cause.

In recent years a new school of gospel interpreters has arisen, the so-called eschatologists. They find the key which unlocks

the mysteries of the gospels in the apocalyptic hope of an approaching world-end. Thus interpreted, the gospels take on a strange, almost repellent aspect. The ethics of Jesus are then *interim* ethics, valid only for the short period before the Christ comes in his glory. Things of this world, though valuable in themselves, are to be avoided because the end is at hand. The Sermon on the Mount presents an eschatological piety, not an ideal for life here. Self-sacrifice is taught as a religious impulse and not a moral attitude. Love for enemies is only the highest proof of love for God and freedom from this world. The Christian is to turn the other cheek to him who smites, with no idea of shaming the wrongdoer, but rather as an heroic proof that he has conquered all dependence on the world. The Master's aim, according to this theory, was to have his disciples burn all bridges behind them and face coming death.

Recent study of apocalyptic literature has indeed thrown light on many obscure passages of the New Testament. We should readily grant that the current belief in an approaching world-end deeply affected the words of Jesus. The eschatologists have also done good service in bringing to the front the intensity of the moral tone in the gospels, the absoluteness of the contrast which Jesus makes between good and evil. No concessions qualify his words. Both the weakness of men and the limitations of social environment are ignored. The Master always speaks as one face to face with eternity. It is a stumbling-block to many Christians today that the belief in a proximate destruction of all things has so large a place in the New Testament. But without this outlook on life would it have been possible for an absolute moral message, good not only for one age but for all ages, to have been given and received? Would not Jesus' great principles have necessarily been smothered in concrete applications to temporary needs had not an eternal future free from human deficiencies been so vividly present in the thought of men? The Christ ideals had a chance to root themselves in the human heart before men's eyes were opened to the slow processes of realization. One may see value in this suggestion and yet find only a caricature of Jesus' teaching in a presentation like that of Albert Schweitzer. According to

such eschatologists as he, the gospels make the belief that the end of the world is near at hand the primary motive of conduct. Such a motive cannot be made dominant now and the gospel message in so far becomes inapplicable to our age. This view, however, is only possible when one emphasizes the abnegations of Jesus to the neglect of the joy in the world which stands side by side with them in the gospel records.

This one-sidedness is apparent in Christian ethics all through the centuries. Either men have found in Jesus an unreasonable asceticism—some to approve, others to reject—or else they have tamed down his radical expressions of self-denial and renunciation until they no longer disturb the world's self-complacency. Are we shut up to these alternatives? The example of Jesus is an everlasting witness to us that the two sides may be harmonized in personal experience without neglecting either phase. His life was, as Chesterton saw, a superhuman paradox where opposite passions blazed side by side. In his soul, childlike joyousness thrived beside utter self-renunciation; a submissiveness that could pray: "Thy will, not mine be done," beside a boldness that could ask to move mountains; a humility before which no service was too lowly, beside an authority which awed the multitudes. The moral supremacy of Jesus Christ is not in any merely negative sinlessness but in the perfect balance of these great antinomies of character. No interpretation of Jesus' moral teaching can prove satisfactory which does not do full justice to this paradoxical element. The question still presses, however, more insistently than ever, What was it in the personality of Jesus which bound together these divergent qualities into a unity? Some all-embracing motive there must have been.

When once the question is clearly put the answer comes of itself. It is the glory of the nineteenth century that that which was truly central in the life of Jesus is now recognized as central in Christianity—the Christ-spirit of love. The Sermon on the Mount is a presentation of the principle of love radically applied. Jesus did not place the motive of conduct in any fear of a proximate world-end, but expressly in a love which imitates God's love. The disciples were taught to love their enemies that they might be

children of the Highest, "for He is kind to the unthankful and to the evil. Be ye merciful as your Father also is merciful."

Jesus lived like all of us in two worlds; a world of things and a world of ideals and persons. They are both God's worlds. He is supreme over both. Jesus, therefore, accepted the world of things with the joy of a child. It is a gift of the loving Father. There is that in Jesus' teachings which responds to the lines of Browning:

Let us not always say
 "Spite of this flesh today,
 I strove, made head, gained ground on the whole."
 As the bird wings and sings
 Let us cry: "All good things
 Are ours, nor soul helps flesh more now than flesh
 helps soul."

But the God from whom these gifts come was all in all to Jesus. When he saw men around him allowing the things to obscure God whose love gave them, there was no language too strong to express the renunciation he demanded. Worldly things are temporal, God and his will are eternal. Worldliness and riches were condemned only as they stood over against God and the divine attitude of love. Love is the strongest motive in the world to call forth extreme self-sacrifice, and the love of Jesus was deep enough to give up life itself and was broad enough to include even his foes. But there was nothing ascetic about it. What a difference there is between the Indian devotee, who throws himself under the wheels of the Juggernaut car to win a future salvation, and the death of Jesus on the cross to free mankind from the power of evil and of sin! Hindu self-abnegation is destructive of life and society, Christian sacrifice in loving service enlarges the life of the individual and builds up society. In such experience the antinomy between joy in the world and renunciation of the world disappears.

Men no longer live in expectation of an immediate world-end; the terrors of nature are gone; modern science has substituted for the demons that frightened our ancestors natural forces subject more or less to human control; even social problems formerly lumped all together and deemed hopeless are now analyzed into

separate tasks which can be accomplished, so that men already talk seriously about removing one of the oldest of human curses—poverty. “O dear, O dear,” cries Night, in *The Blue Bird*, “I cannot understand man these last few years . . . Already he has captured a third of my Mysteries, all my Terrors are afraid, and dare not leave the house, my Ghosts have taken flight, and the greater part of my Sicknesses are ill.” This means that the fears which used to restrain man’s passions have lost their control. A great optimistic wave of freedom has swept over mankind, and pleasure is rampant. Will history repeat itself, and unrestrained pleasure-seeking now, as in the ancient world, waste away civilization’s accumulated energy and bring on again degenerate times when self-abnegation must necessarily be man’s highest ideal? Such a reaction is bound to come unless by the power of Christ-like love the mighty forces of our day can be bound together and held to righteous ends. This is the supreme task of the church of Jesus Christ in the twentieth century.